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SUBJECT: CROATIAN AMBASSADOR SAYS U.S. SHOULD BECOME MORE INVOLVED IN DISPUTE WITH SLOVENIA

Classified By: CDA Brad Freden, reasons 1.4(b,d)

Summary

¶11. (C) Svjetlan Berkovic, Croatian Ambassador to Slovenia, made a pitch to CDA on June 29 for greater U.S. involvement in getting Croatia's EU accession talks back on track. Citing the example of Slovenia's ratification of Croatia's NATO membership, "which ran through Washington," Berkovic expressed the view that U.S. pressure would convince Slovenia to allow Croatia's accession talks to resume. Out of concern for regional stability, he averred, the US should get more involved in solving the dispute. CDA responded that the U.S. wants Croatia in the EU as soon as possible and believes that the Rehn process offers the best hope for doing that. We have made this clear recently in Ljubljana, Zagreb and Brussels. In doing so, the U.S. is already playing a larger role, not in support of a particular outcome on the border-demarcation issue, but in support of Rehn and thereby of Croatia's rapid EU accession. The U.S. sees the Rehn process as the only game in town, and we will support our allies Croatia and Slovenia as they move toward an agreement.

In the end, both sides are going to have to sell any agreement to their respective publics, and this will require strong political leadership in both Zagreb and Ljubljana.

END SUMMARY.

Political Atmosphere "Poisoning" Otherwise Good Relations

¶12. (C) Ambassador Berkovic, who requested the meeting, began on a positive note, highlighting recent joint celebrations of Slovenian and Croatian independence as well as the 13 percent increase in Slovene tourists to Croatia from 2008 to 2009. He stressed, however, that the political atmosphere could "step by step poison everything else," no matter how good the day-to-day relationship. Berkovic noted that, for the first time in his four months in Ljubljana, he is "not optimistic" about making progress on the border dispute. He worried that Slovenia's blockade is hardening public sentiment, causing people in both countries to move toward "right-wing solutions." He claimed that this shift in public opinion could halt or significantly slow down needed reforms in Croatia.

¶13. (C) Berkovic speculated that the approach of tourist season, and a correspondingly slow news time, could present a challenge for relations. One small incident, he said, such as a car accident or a disagreement between fishermen in Piran Bay, could get sensational treatment in the media, leading to further hardening of positions. He pointed to the recent media commentary on the violation of Slovenia's airspace by two Croatian fighters escorting the Chinese president to Zagreb as an example of a "minor incident" becoming a big deal once the media learned of it.

Regional Consequences

¶4. (C) Berkovic asked for greater US involvement in the situation, as he feared the EU would not bring sufficient attention to the problem. He dismissed EU efforts as ineffectual, reciting a catalog of EU proposals during the 1990s that failed until the U.S. got involved. In a region known for instability, Berkovic said Croatia's EU accession will set the tone. If Slovenia ends its blockade, Croatia would pave the way for other western Balkan countries to join the EU; but if the Slovenia-Croatia dispute sets a precedent, noted Berkovic, each new entrant will use the accession process as leverage over its neighbors who are next in line. He cited Croatia's negotiations with Montenegro as a successful example, as the two countries agreed to arbitration through the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at the Hague over a disputed peninsula. Berkovic stated that Slovenia, unlike Montenegro, is "afraid" of the ICJ because "international law is clear" and Slovenia would not get "even one-third of what they want" based upon international law.

Sticking with Rehn, Getting to Yes

¶5. (C) CDA acknowledged Berkovic's request for more U.S. involvement, and reiterated the U.S. position of focusing on getting Slovenia and Croatia to agree on a process for resolving the border dispute. While the U.S. does not have any substantive position on how or where to draw the border itself, we do not want to see the Rehn process break down. CDA also speculated that the Swedish EU Presidency might be

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more active on this issue than was the Czech, and said the U.S. would support this. He argued for quiet diplomacy away from the media spotlight, citing as unhelpful Slovenia's public characterization of Croatia as having walked away from negotiations. Berkovic noted that Croatia had not "walked away" from Rehn, but had only indicated it could not accept the changes submitted by Slovenia to Rehn's previous text. He did not dispute CDA's assertion that the differences between the current text and the text approved by the Croatian parliament in May were "cosmetic." However, he expressed concern about the timing of lifting Slovenia's hold on the accession chapters should they reach agreement. CDA explained our support for re-starting the accession process upon signature of an agreement. It appeared that parliamentary ratification would be necessary on both sides for legal or political reasons, but this should not hold up the resumption of accession talks.

FREDEN